



***BIGGER ISN'T NECESSARILY BETTER:
MAKING COLLECTIVE DETERRENCE
AND DEFENSE WORK IN THE INDO-
PACIFIC***

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The rise of an increasingly confident, assertive, and capable China has triggered a transformation of Indo-Pacific security architecture, at the national, bilateral, and multilateral levels. These efforts are designed to better compete with, deter, and, if necessary, defend against China. To succeed, they must be nurtured, and they must advance fast given the magnitude and rapid increase of Chinese power and influence. Acute security problems in Europe, and more recently in the Middle East, make it even more urgent for like-minded Indo-Pacific countries to work together and strengthen regional deterrence and defense.

Start with the Five

The Pacific Forum, with support of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, convened representatives from the United States, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and the United Kingdom to discuss these issues. These are the most militarily capable and most enthusiastic allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific. This “core group” will, hopefully, influence and rally others from the region and beyond that may

be less military capable, less active, less aligned, or less integrated.

The dialogue began with a discussion on how each country views the ends, ways, and means of deterrence and defense in the Indo-Pacific, i.e., what each wants to achieve and what their priorities are; what each is doing, and how, to get to these achievements; and, finally, what tools, capabilities, or resources each uses or needs for that purpose. To test those thoughts, the dialogue included a scenario-based exercise that featured a multidimensional contingency, one with simultaneous crises across the Indo-Pacific, providing an opportunity to practice joint work to address a potentially “real” problem.

Key Findings and Recommendations

The dialogue report, “A Heavy Lift: Making Collective Deterrence and Defense Work in the Indo-Pacific,” is published in Issues & Insights and available on the Pacific Forum website. Its key findings and recommendations include:

Finding #1: There is general agreement among the Five regarding Chinese intentions: Beijing seeks to rewrite the regional security order in its image. That said, here are differences in assessing how far China will go to advance its interests and the priority partners assign to various interests, and thus how they will respond to contingencies.

Recommendation: Work to understand each partner’s positions and policies vis-à-vis China should receive considerably more attention and focus. Of particular value is identifying each partner’s redlines when it comes to China, in peacetime, during a crisis, or an armed conflict.

Finding #2: The four US allies are modernizing their security establishments, acquiring new military capabilities, and demonstrating a readiness to do more for national and collective defense. There is nonetheless a need to expand and deepen defense cooperation, notably in Southeast Asia and Europe.

At the same time, larger coalitions are not necessarily better.

Recommendation: The United States should seek to enlarge collective deterrence and defense in the Indo-Pacific as much as possible, but not at the expense of efficacy. Material contributions should be the price of participation. At the most basic level, participating countries must be willing to bring concrete capabilities to the table or plug gaps in a US-led coalition in other ways. Future research should delve into the specific capabilities that each ally could or should bring to bear in a given situation. To maintain flexibility and coherence, it is best to focus on countries most aligned with the United States.

Finding #3: There are no mechanisms to coordinate defense cooperation across alliances, the new partnerships among US allies, or other security initiatives. Yet such mechanisms are important given growing capabilities in the region, and defense establishments must anticipate simultaneous, multidimensional, and complex crises.

Recommendation: Neither the current situation—one with no mechanism—nor an Asian equivalent to NATO are viable solutions now. Identifying collective solutions that would work should be a priority. The goal should be to link existing mechanisms in a way that maximizes coordination and cooperation efficiency.

Finding #4: Critical to effective deterrence and defense is a new division of labor among the United States and its allies. Failure to reach agreement on these risks overstretches the United States and its partners. Given that China's primary focus in most Asian contingencies would be Taiwan, all participants must understand the expectations upon them in a Taiwan contingency, i.e., the roles they would play, the responsibilities they would embrace, and the capabilities they would deploy and employ,

individually or together. This is an area for future research.

Recommendation: The United States should find the right balance between continuing to lead while trusting and respecting allied choices. Generally, that entails giving more freedom of action to allies. To help manage that change, there should be a study on the benefits, costs, and risks involved in the United States having “empowered allies.”

Finding #5: There is a tension between efficiency—encouraging allies to do more “in their backyard”—and insisting on the “indivisibility of security,” i.e., that a contingency somewhere has consequences everywhere and should therefore trigger allied action.

Recommendation: The United States should encourage its allies to do more in geographic areas close to home (because they know them best and have vested interests there) while retaining a sense of global responsibility. The more capable the ally, the broader the role it should have in maintaining regional and global security orders. In that spirit, Australia and Japan stand out, and the United States should actively promote their actions.

Finding #6: Effective deterrence and defense is best done if the United States and its allies focus first on strategic integration and then institutional and tactical integration. While gray zone contingencies are a concern, the focus should be strategic deterrence, which has been neglected. Finally, effective deterrence and defense demands attention to—and similar coordination of—other forms of state behavior, particularly economic policy.

Recommendation: Adapting deterrence and defense to current and looming realities requires pursuit of two goals: one that prioritizes the most serious dangers (a contingency at the strategic—even nuclear—level) and one that seeks to bring to bear all the instruments of national (and regional) power to address problems.

Designing strategies to pursue these two goals in a coordinated and integrated fashion should be a priority.

Finding #7: Coast Guards play increasingly central roles in the Indo-Pacific. China, in particular, has exploited the legal gap between law enforcement and military responsibilities and mandates.

Recommendation: The United States and its allies should close that window of opportunity, build national capabilities, and improve coordination and cooperation among coast guards.

Finding #8: In a crisis, China will do its best to identify seams in the thinking and responses of the United States and its allies and exploit them. China also enjoys an asymmetry of stakes and of geography in its favor.

Recommendation: The United States and its allies should consider going beyond deterrence and defense and proactively exploit Chinese vulnerabilities. In a crisis, they should consider opening second fronts. Planning for such developments should happen now.

Finding #9: US allies view the United States as an “outside power” in the Indo-Pacific, believing that it is in the theater by choice, not by geography. The possibility of the United States “leaving” the region shapes their policy decisions.

Recommendation: Washington should do more to weave its presence into the fabric of the Indo-Pacific to reassure allies of its commitment to the region. Forward deployment of military hardware is a critical yet insufficient step in that direction. Non-military involvement would go a long way to reassure allies, notably in trade policy.

Finding #10: Australia has adapted its military posture to enhance national defense and advance collective deterrence and defense in the Indo-Pacific.

Recommendation: The United States should encourage these developments and pursue defense industrial integration with Australia. AUKUS is a stepping stone to these efforts.

Finding #11: Japan is ready to play a bigger role in the provision of regional security and is improving its ability to do so. This evolution encounters no pushback in the region (except China). In a crisis, however, there is still profound—if not excessive—emphasis on legal issues.

Recommendation: The United States should continue to encourage Japan to play a more active role in security matters. This requires less discussion of defense budgets and capability acquisition and more discussion of operationalizing deterrence and defense and response in a contingency.

Finding #12: South Korea shares US and allies’ concern about Chinese intentions. Its primary focus remains a Korean Peninsula contingency, however. Seoul is concerned about US commitment to its defense in a crisis, especially when the United States addresses multiple contingencies.

Recommendation: While the United States should encourage South Korea to broaden its strategic outlook beyond the Korean Peninsula, it should stress that Seoul’s focus in a Taiwan contingency should be prevent Pyongyang from exploiting the situation by launching an attack.

Finding #13: The United Kingdom has a limited role to play in an Indo-Pacific crisis. Moreover, while the trajectory of UK policy indicates deeper involvement in the region’s defense, it is not clear that its public has any appetite for active engagement.

Recommendation: The United States should explore ways the United Kingdom (or any other European country) could contribute to a contingency in the Indo-Pacific, either militarily or in other capacities, notably economically.

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